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MAN'S CONFLICT WITH MANATEES AND DUGONGS CONTINUES

Manatees and dugongs, large and odd-looking marine mammals of the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans and several major continental rivers, are not faring as well as they should in many areas.

Poaching, accidental netting during large-scale fishing operations, and law enforcement difficulties all contribute to their plight, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, said today.

Of the three species of manatees, the Florida manatee population seems to be least troubled. A 1972-73 aerial survey of Florida's coasts and rivers found the population numbering between 800 and 1,300--a figure that has remained stable for the past several years with some local increases. No figures on the other species are available, but historically manatees were seen in tens of thousands in areas where they are rarely seen today.

The dugong, native to the coastal waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, seems faced with near extinction. Although once abundant enough to support a large commercial dugong fishery, its numbers have declined drastically in recent years. Stable populations exist only near the coast of northern Australia. The dugong has been completely extirpated in separate coastal areas of west India and is now rarely seen in the Red Sea and nearby gulfs.

(more)

An annual report summarizing developments concerning marine mammals has been published in the Federal Register as required by the Marine Mammals Protection Act of 1972. The report provides a current status report on manatees and the dugong.

There are three subspecies of manatees--the African, Amazonian, and Florida. All are subtropical, plant eating mammals, whose range includes the coastal waters and rivers of Africa, North America and South America. Appearances vary, but in general manatees are spindle-shaped, heavy-bodied creatures sometimes weighing nearly half a ton. They have blunt heads with prominent, whiskered noses and flippers forelimbs. Instead of hind limbs they have a flat, rounded tail.

The manatee, a sluggish beast, is a night browser of aquatic plants. Although not yet proven, it is believed that manatees must return to fresh water to drink. Except for the relationship between mother and offspring, manatees do not have strong bonding instincts. Males travel in groups during the female's breeding season, but following this season the groups disperse and the mammals lead a solitary existence.

Dugongs resemble manatees, except for having a different tail, one that is broadly notched. They are found only in the tropical and subtropical coastal waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, on the east coast of Africa and along the northern coast of Australia. Unlike the manatee, dugongs occasionally travel in groups with as many as six members. Historically, they moved about in large herds of several hundred animals.

For decades hunters pursued manatees during night hunts, using harpoons and guns. Manatees were killed primarily for their meat, but also for their hides, which were used to make crude shields and, in later years,

South American machine belts and water hoses. In 1932 groups of Nigerians who considered the animals a nuisance to boat traffic in local rivers began a campaign to rid the area of manatees. Within three years the entire local population was wiped out. Currently, manatees have legal protection worldwide and hunting has consequently declined.

Dugongs were hunted throughout their range also. Their meat is quite desirable because it is similar to veal or pork and "keeps" for a long time. Dugongs have also provided oil similar to cod liver oil and leather hide especially suitable for sandal making. At one time it was thought that particular body parts had medicinal or aphrodisiac properties. Today, hunting pressures have been greatly reduced, in part due to the dugong's decline and also because it is protected by law in most of its currently inhabited areas.

Both manatees and dugongs are plagued by boats, particularly those with large keels and propellers which inflict mortal wounds to thousands each year. To date the only positive action taken to prevent such accidents is the regulation of boat speeds in Florida in a manatee wintering area. A high death rate is also attributed to the accidental nettings which cause the air-breathing mammals to drown. The use of herbicides to control weeds in congested waterways, as well as accidental industrial pollution, not only deplete the food supply but can be directly responsible for many of these marine mammal deaths.

Although manatees and dugongs are protected by law in some areas and only regulated hunting is allowed in others, poaching is still a major problem and their meat continues to show up in foreign markets.

The use of manatees for weed control has been suggested as a possible solution for plant-infested waters. The domestication of manatees for meat also has been suggested, but reduced populations and a low reproductive rate make this prospect unlikely. Individual research is underway on each species of manatee, including a Fish and Wildlife Service tracking study of the Florida manatee which will begin this month. The U.S. National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Research Council of Guyana are planning to jointly establish an international manatee research center in Guyana. In addition, Fish and Wildlife Service surveys are planned over the next three years to determine dugong distribution in many areas of the Pacific where little is known of this mammal.

